

THIS IS BEING SENT TO YOU BY THE DIOCESAN COMMITTEE
TO PROMOTE AND PLAN FOR THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN.

(This sermon was preached by The Very Rev. Edward G. Harris at the Diocese of Pennsylvania's ordination service on June 15, 1974. Portions of it are dependent on the work and words of a number of men and women who for the most part have been given no acknowledgement but who are greatly appreciated.)

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The occasion for our gathering together this morning is one of celebration and high import. Two of our sisters and three of our brothers are to be ordained to the diaconate in the Church of Christ. They have been called by God and qualified by God to be ministers of the new life in Christ, and the Church acts today to recognize and ratify this ministry which God has entrusted to them. We rejoice and rightly so. Six to twelve months from now, barring some unforeseen and untoward development, these same three brothers, called and qualified by God, will be ordained to the priesthood in the Church of Christ. We shall rejoice anew and rightly so. Six to twelve months from now, however, barring some irregular action, our two sisters here, equally called and qualified by God, will not be ordained to the priesthood because they are our sisters and not our brothers. And that, my friends, will not be cause for rejoicing.

It is this situation which calls forth my sermon and which explains why, on this occasion which is one of ordination to the diaconate, I am nevertheless impelled to speak about the priesthood and specifically about the ordination of women to the priesthood. For as I have gradually come to understand, it is not only that God is in truth calling women to the priesthood; it is also that God is using this action to reveal to all of us a deeper and fuller nature and meaning of priesthood than we knew before. That means that if we are adequately to comprehend priesthood itself we must deal directly with the issues which are involved in the priestly calling and ordaining of women. For that is the way God is acting today. And that is to say that it is not just a matter of there being no theological impediments to the ordaining of women to the priesthood; it is even more a matter of there being overriding theological factors which actually require such ordination and that these are exactly the factors apart from which we cannot understand the priesthood as Christ exercises it and calls us to share in it.

The determining characteristic of Christian priesthood is that there is but one priesthood and that is Christ's. Only through Christ does the priesthood become his people's. There is, of course, a priesthood of all Christians -- the ordained and the unordained alike; this is derived from Christ's priesthood and it is a ministry of loving service. To this all Christians are called; indeed all Christians -- men and women alike -- share in this priesthood because of their inclusion through baptism in Christ's body, the Church. There is also a priesthood of those who are ordained in the Church as priests, those officially designated as individual ministers of the Church and appointed to preside at the Eucharist as channels

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of the divine action in which God's Spirit makes the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. This too is not a priesthood separate from Christ's, for priests are in fact agents through whom Christ Himself, the one and only priest, continually re-presents to the Church and the world His saving word and act.

Now right there is the key. Christ's priesthood of saving word and act is a priesthood of reconciliation, of bringing together in love and joyful union the world and God, all people and God. That is the heart of the Gospel -- that God was in Christ reconciling the world to God. The ordained priesthood is the agency by which this reconciling act is represented and mediated, generation after generation, in and through the Church as the body of Christ. What the reconciling priesthood of Christ preeminently displays is the unlimited love of God for every man and woman. Christ's priesthood of reconciliation -- which is the origin and pattern of ours -- is the overcoming of all alienation and discrimination, all racism and sexism, all blindness and hard self-interest, all structures of injustice and oppression and division. It is the demonstration of God's truth and mercy and the very enactment of God's love -- that God accepts us and enables us to accept God, that God brings us to the fulfillment of that liberation and wholeness which is the reconciliation of people with God, of person with person, of me with myself. The irreducible message of the Gospel is this love of God for all men and women, that all are called to the same dignity and destiny of a reconciliation for which a person's sex just as a person's race or merit has absolutely no power to qualify.

It is obvious, of course, that Jesus Christ was male. It is equally true that he was Jewish and a first century person. The incarnation, however, has never meant at its center the incarnation of Jesus Christ in the male sex. Its point has always been incarnation in human nature. Rosemary Ruether has stressed this insight, that the essential character of the incarnation is not in terms of Jesus' male sexuality but in terms of generic human nature which, as the book of Genesis tells us, is both male and female. The importance of the incarnation is its true human nature in thorough reality, in ongoing presence, in revolutionary character. The Word of God became flesh in humanity not primarily in maleness. In the same way, Christ's priesthood of reconciliation was a divine-human drama in which his sexual specification played no significant part. It simply was not the essential qualification for his role and achievement. This is not to blur the important and distinctive differentiation between male and female; it is not to uphold some bland unisex. It is only to say that just as the nature of God transcends sex so the nature of the priesthood of reconciliation transcends sex. The point of the bible is that the nature of God is unique. This means that God is not in the nature of man nor of woman, nor of both together. God's nature does indeed hold both maleness and femaleness in being and they are good; but God is neither male nor female, neither he nor she. God transcends all creaturely characteristics and is unique. And just as sex cannot validly pertain to God or express God's own nature, so it cannot pertain to or express the essence of the priesthood of reconciliation which is itself the nature and life of God at work in Christ.

For the point of this priesthood of reconciliation is precisely to bring into being the new life in Christ, that life which itself transcends all divisions and dominations of nation or class, of race or sex or status, that new life which penetrates and transforms every device we employ to divide and discriminate. That is central to the gospel imperative and decisive for the nature of priesthood.

From this it follows that masculinity as such constitutes no necessary qualification for ordination to the priesthood. Indeed, since masculine and feminine elements are present in every human being, no absolute qualification or impediment can be based on them at all. The basic qualification for ordination is simply redeemed humanity. Since women are full members of this body of Christ, this community of the baptized who are the redeemed, and on identical terms with men, they cannot but have the basic qualification for ordination to the priesthood.

My point, however, is more than one of proper eligibility. It is one of the pressing demand of that which is right. I am thoroughly persuaded that God is now calling women to the priesthood. Therefore, I am convinced that the Church must respond in obedient faith. The Church not only has the right and freedom to ordain women to the priesthood, it has the call and duty to do so. The Church must do this because Christ's priesthood is too comprehensive and rich to be contained by the symbolism of one sex only to the exclusion of the other. That damages and truncates our priesthood. In addition to masculine representation, the immeasurable fullness of Christ's priesthood calls for feminine expression too in order to represent adequately the God who sustains both masculinity and femininity. This is no matter of women trying to be men or of women copying what male priests now do. Rather this is a matter of women bringing their own uniqueness and gifts, and by their special capabilities, by their very life and experience as women providing a wholeness to priesthood through feminine perspectives and models to which both men and women will find themselves responding. This will enable us to plumb new dimensions and gain increasing awareness of the unsearchable riches of Christ. As the Report of the Special Committee of the House of Bishops put it: "Far from confusing sexual roles or affirming unisex values, might not the ordination of women (to the priesthood) assure the enrichment of our understanding of humanity in Christ by guaranteeing the presence of both its components visibly present in the offering of the Oblation which is Christ's and ours." Then too the Church must do this in order to express and celebrate the fact that in Jesus Christ God has delivered us from all structures of domination and privileged access to power. Only so does the Church realize its true mission to be the chief representative of a liberated humanity and in its ordained ministry to be the revealer of what leadership and authority are like in an authentically human community. Says the Roman Catholic theologian Gregory Baum: "The ordination of women to the priesthood would restore a prophetic quality to the Church's ministry, educating people to discern the injustices in present society and presenting them with an ideal for the participation of women in the life of society." By ordaining women to the priesthood the Church can begin to assume the shape of a community which truly represents

redemptive reconciliation with God and with all persons. It can thus begin to re-shape the direction of society and enable a genuine freeing of men and women to be in each other's eyes more nearly what God made us to be.

For me then it comes down to this: The ordination of women to the priesthood is not especially a matter of the liberation of women; it is essentially a matter of the liberation of the priesthood of reconciliation. It is not only a matter of justice, equal rights, and humaneness; it is equally a matter of what is necessary for the proper being and functioning of our priesthood. It is not a matter of the Church popularly keeping up with the pack, or living in peace with crusading women; it is a matter of a truncated priesthood gaining its own full health and wholeness. It is not just a matter of what is probably some day inevitable anyway; it is a matter of that which is right, of the Church being obedient to the will of God.

That is how I see it. And believing and feeling as I do, I have no choice but to call for the ordination of women to the priesthood now. I am painfully aware that there is great diversity of thinking in our Church on this issue, involving as it does theological considerations, biblical considerations, and considerations of Church tradition. I am also conscious that it raises the vexing question of amicable consensus in our household of faith. However, I am convinced that all these factors have been given due consideration by the Church at large. The House of Bishops is on record as being in favor of the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate. In two successive General Conventions, the House of Deputies is also on record in favor of this, even though an inequitable rule of voting procedure in that House has frustrated the will of the majority. But the ruling factor which requires our action now is obedience to the Lordship of Christ, our response to the sovereignty of Christ in the Church. This summons then is intended as an act of Christian obedience to the Spirit of Christ. So I call upon the commissions of ministry and the standing committees of our Church's dioceses, and I call upon the bishops of our Church to ordain to the priesthood without further delay those women who are presently deacons with proper time in office and who have in fact been called and qualified by God. In doing this I also call myself to support them. And I pray that this may be, as it is intended, a proclamation of the gospel -- that God has acted for us and expects us to respond in ready obedience.

My sisters and brothers: Flora and John, Douglas and Alice and Stanley. I have said these things on the occasion of your ordination, not to plead a special cause, but because as I understand them these matters bear directly, inescapably, and in determining fashion on the essence of the ministry you now enter, the ministry Christ gloriously shares with us, this very ministry of Christ which has reconciled us with God and with each other. And the charge I give you is from Second Corinthians, chapter 4, verse 1: "Seeing then, that we have been entrusted with this ministry, which we owe entirely to God's mercy, we never lose heart."

In the name of God, Creator, Saviour, Sanctifier. Amen.